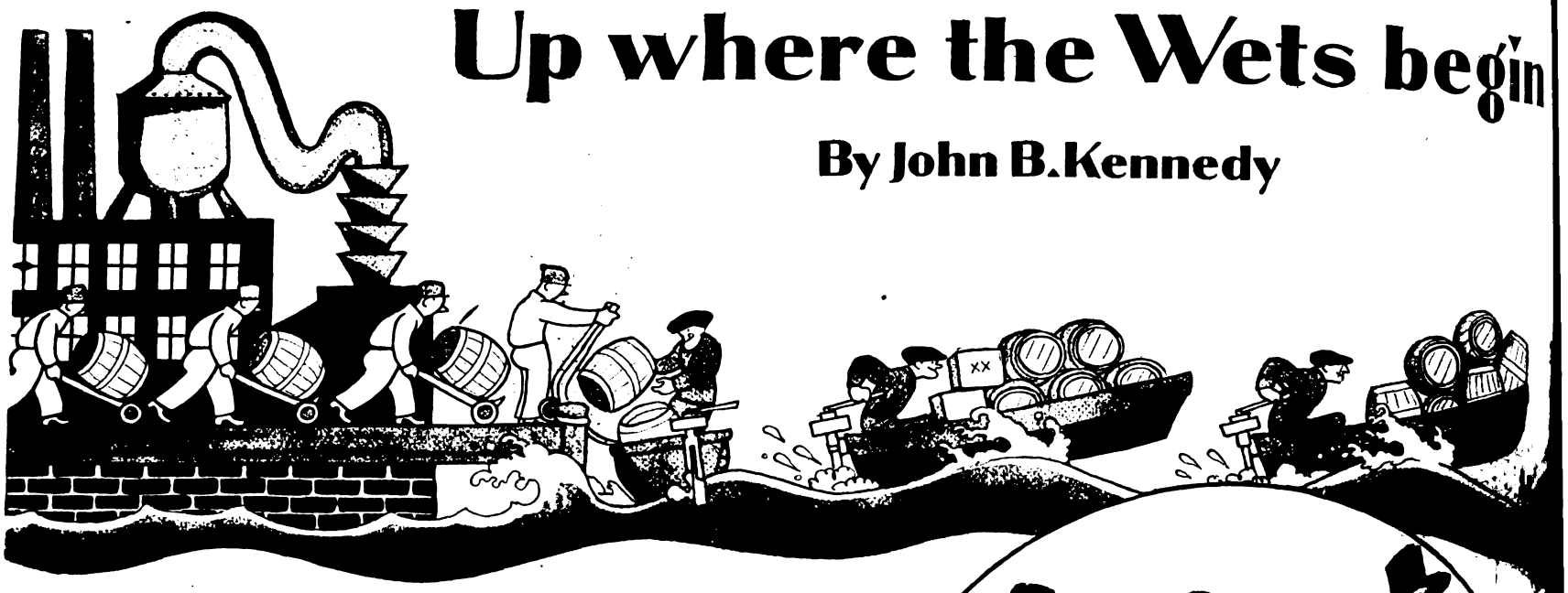
Up where the Wets begin

By John B. Kennedy



BUFFALO, the Lady of the Lakes, was in righteous uproar some dozen years ago, at the last civic election before prohibition. There were some 1,300 saloons in the city. From waterfront dives to the ornate bars of the first-rate hotels, they formed richly varied strata of oases. All orders of society, from bums to brahmins, patronized them.

But the cry of reform arose. Buffalo was over-salooned. Toronto, a larger city across Lake Ontario, had only seventy-two bars, and all those made more or less respectable by being wedded to hotels. The Buffalo reformers made vast noise and found support from merchants and manufacturers and the proprietors of eating places who were pained to see long lines of burghers file into saloons hungry and thirsty, to emerge glowing with beer and heavy laden with free lunch.

Reform lost. The saloons remained. Then a glad cry smote the welkin, for prohibition came and the 1,300 saloons were doomed. Reformers sat back in sanctity and waited for the halo-stations to open up for popular distribution.

They are still waiting.

No longer can it be said, in accuracy, that Buffalo has 1,300 saloons. Two thousand would be nearer the mark. They flourish in residential districts and up side streets from main thoroughfares—even, if you are in a hurry and must stow away a fast one, on the main thoroughfares.

The sort of thing that might be expected of a metropolis neighboring that greatest of all prohibition nuisances—the Canadian border. You can drive from Bridgeburg, and other Ontario towns across the Peace Bridge, to the heart of Buffalo much quicker than from Buffalo's suburbs. Naturally, supply of illegal beverages should be copious and constant.

It is. But imports across the Canadian border are only half the story. Indeed, not quite half.

As elsewhere and everywhere in prohibition field operations—maneuvers is a fitter word—the mark of the ostrich is over the land. Andrew MacCampbell, the sturdy Scot agent for the forty-six counties of northern New York, will tell you something of his troubles in trying to keep track of breweries, wineries, speakeasies, with seventy-two men in the vast empire of thirst in the Empire State.

But he will not tell you what can be discovered in thirty minutes with a dollar and a romping cab—that Buffalo is the beer garden of America. And real, genu-ine beer, gentlemen; not the hybrid, pseudo-alcoholized bilge we have heard about in Kansas.

With a group of equally earnest students of sociology I was asked—in a well-equipped, club-like place that differed from the old days only in the absence of lascivious pictures from the walls—there I was asked the hypothetical question of what, if things were as they used to be, I would care to drink. Replying, quite honestly, "Canadian ale," laughter shook the place.

For in Buffalo Canadian ale is more or less scorned. Just as it is more or less faked.

Up at Lewiston, around the Canadian shore of Grand Island in the Niagara River, and at a hundred inlets down the fresh-water straits made by the river that sports between Lakes Erie and Ontario, you can see on any fair winter, spring, summer or autumn day the fleets of the importers of Canadian ale, and whisky and gin. There you will find the most daring craft—twelve-foot open boats with outboard motors, that audaciously drew clearance papers for Havana, Panama or the far ports of the Caribbean. To get to salt water, of course, they'd have to hire wheels. But that was no deterrent until recently Canada stopped such flagrant nonsense.

In the years since Ontario went wet these patient fleets have plied their trade perseveringly. Sometimes the customs patrol knocks them off, sometimes it doesn't. More often, I should think, until within the past few months—when, to the surprise of the brave men and true who run the river in all sorts of weather, they saw the price of bottled ale drop suddenly. And when the united bootleggers sent over to Buffalo to find out why the American market for Canadian ale had fallen abruptly, they learned a simple and illuminating truth—that Buffalo's brewers had mastered the making of ale as palatable if not as pure as the stuff made in Canada. The bottle and labels were exact duplicates of the foreign product. And there were fewer risks in supplying demand.

An Ingenious Fisherman

"See," said a customs man to me, pointing to an upturned Canadian boat that looked very much like a crocodile twisted upside down. "That's the first new trick I've seen in twelve months—and it didn't work."

The trick was passingly ingenious. A Canadian fisherman operated in the waters of Niagara River—catching, I suppose, circus trout. What but acrobatic fish could possibly conduct, day by day, the operations that usually enter into the life of a fish, in waters so turbulent? That was his trade and he stuck to it—ostensibly. Customs men of the water patrol frisked the boat zealously when it crossed from Canadian to American waters. The fisherman cheerfully submitted. No contraband was ever found.

Illustrated by Herb Roth

Customs men, with genially patient disdain, monthly extract 100,000 bottles from travelers

Yet no fisherman, reasoned the customs men, not even had he the patience of Izaak Walton, would make a dangerous river crossing so often just to see the scenery. They watched him closely. One sad afternoon the fisherman tried to beach in a strange spot—and couldn't. His secret was known or very healthily suspected. Customs men towed him to dry dock, where, examining the bottom of his boat, they found it harnessed with ingeniously devised racks that contained six cases of His Majesty's best, government-stamped Scotch.

Captures of bootleggers who display a modicum of headwork in their racket are hailed with delight by the border customs patrol. They provide touches of spectacle in a dull game. There was one bright chap, for instance, who adapted the smoke-screen principle to river rum-running. His idea was to make a dash for it, and lay behind him defensive clouds of black smoke. The idea worked beautifully, but the wrong way. A stiff wind up-river swung the smoke screen fore instead of aft, and the brave fellow finished his game of blind man's bluff smack in the middle of a reception committee of four government boats.

Still, if there's one lesson the smugglers learned at school, it's that old, reliable reiteration, try, try, again. It's estimated that more than two hundred craft comprise the rum-running armada, new recruits falling in line when the government knocks off a boat. The smugglers don't wait for official welcomes. They skip the ship and charge their loss.

The Price List Tells the Story

Customs men rightfully take pride in their statistics; but the surest index to the state of the Buffalo booze-front—the warehouse, so to speak, for western New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio—is the price of booze. In Buffalo you can obtain Ontario government-wrapped whisky, Scotch or rye, for five dollars a quart, brands that cost only a dollar are a quarter less at the official provincial vending stations. Gin is about the same, the wines and liqueurs are not sufficiently in demand to warrant risks of bulk importation.

The bridges spanning the Niagara River make more trouble for the customs inspectors than the sustained guerrilla rushes of the exporters. Frequent trains vie with endless motor traffic. Likewise the ports of Lewiston and of Charlotte outside Rochester are debarkation points for thousands of steamboat passengers every day from spring to fall. Each passenger by boat and train must submit to customs inspection. That, again, is not the worst part of the customs job. Never-ending motor traffic cramps the style of the

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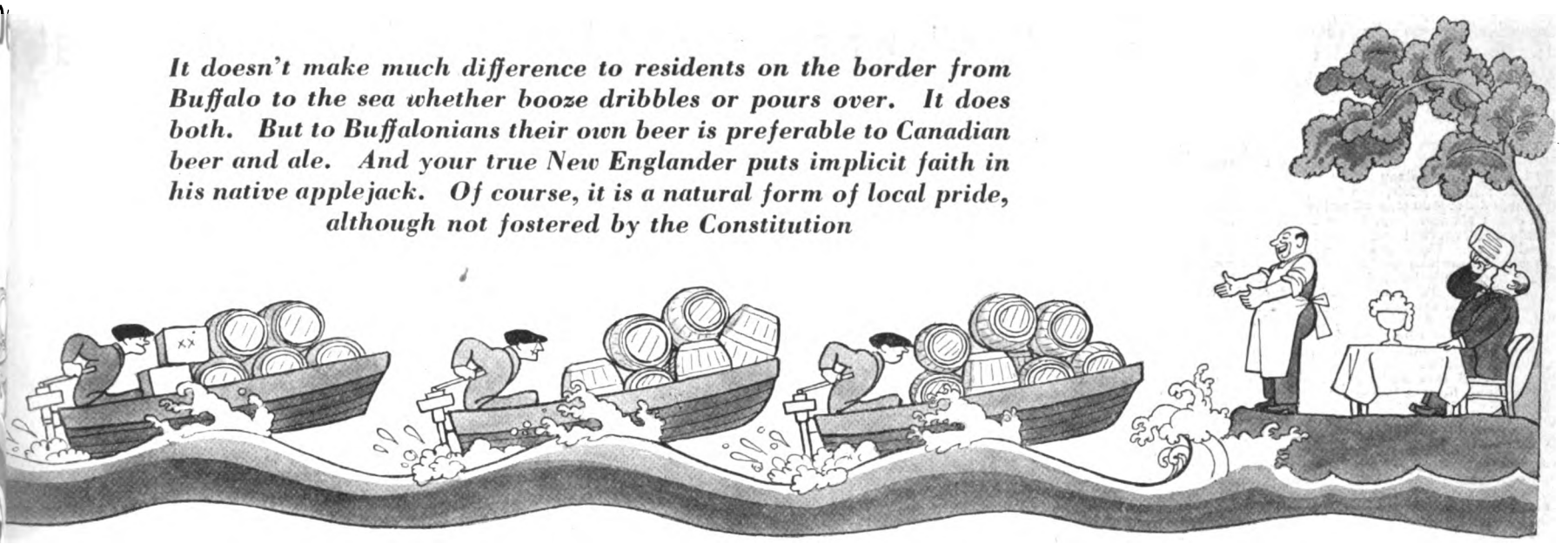
It doesn't make much difference to residents on the border from Buffalo to the sea whether booze dribbles or pours over. It does both. But to Buffalonians their own beer is preferable to Canadian beer and ale. And your true New Englander puts implicit faith in his native applejack. Of course, it is a natural form of local pride, although not fostered by the Constitution



eescore fervent men who switch tricks duty along that concentrated border. They cannot possibly begin to give a rough examination to each car, otherse the lines that take four hours daily holiday weather would take almost many weeks to cross the border. rough all the hills and dales and rking spaces of the American Sahara, o is so poor as not to know a friend o can brag that he had a bottle of real stuff brought back from that tario trip. And if that hearsay evince is not sufficient there are the cold ures of the Ontario and Quebec comssions, the former showing more uor permits issued than there are rable, drinking adults in the Province, d the amount procurable is unlimited law; while the Quebec liquor control, ich maintains the mythical regulan of one bottle per buy per person, orts more hard liquor sold each ar than the thrifty citizens of that aint old Province could drink in two ars without becoming candidates for eley cures.

Not much commercial smuggling gets the customs guards at the bridges. In earlier days it was attempted; but a twenty-four-hour watch and the more devious opportunities provided by lake and river made it comparatively too expensive.

Yet hordes of petty, one- and two-bottle smugglers, for whom the customs men have a genially patient disdain, are punctuated now and again by ambitious shippers who dare to match wits with Uncle Sam's sleuths.

Matching Wits with Uncle Sam

One such sent a laugh around the New York fruit belt when it became generally known that he had crossed a bridge in an undated touring truck, modeled on the lines of Noah's Ark. Halting at the customs shed he was asked for a declaration.

"Just got some beer aboard," he said.

"What kind of beer?" asked the customs man.

"Ontario beer."

"You can't take that in," said the customs man. "It's illegal."

"It ain't illegal in Ontario."

"Tut, tut," said the customs man.

The customer is "warned" that yeast will make his beer illegal and palatable

They relieved him of a few cases of Carlin's beer, fining him, as the law demands, two dollars a bottle. He paid the fine as far as he said his finances would go and was permitted to proceed. In Buffalo he unloaded eighteen cases of whisky that had been camouflaged by the beer.

A companion tale, vouched for by a customs executive, is that of the venerable clergyman, ministering, so he declared, to little parishes in Canada and in Buffalo. Three or four times a week he crossed a bridge in a car as big as a coal gondola. Beaming from the steering wheel he'd bless the customs boys and roll onward, undisturbed.

A bright young Irishman in the service one day spoke to his superior:

"The next time Father S. crosses the bridge I'm going to stop him and look over that car."

"Careful," warned the elder. "With few exceptions the clergy of all creeds behave pretty well. We've only caught a few toting booze. Be careful."

"Well," mused the young Irishman. "There's something funny about his reverence. I know priests have housekeepers, but there's few I've seen would make good on a magazine cover. Father S. has one of them. No, two of them."

"Careful," warned the senior officer.

At starry eve the benign cleric rumbled across a momentarily uncrowded bridge. He was frankly surprised when stopped.

"Will you and the lady," said the young officer, "kindly step out of the car while I look it over."

His reverence blushed to the edge of his reversed collar.

"Why," he expostulated, "this has never been done before. I'm a Catholic priest."

"And I'm a Catholic layman," the young officer replied. "I won't keep you long."

That was inaccurate. His reverence was detained for hours—with the lady. Under torrential protest the young officer took the superstructure of that ancient car to bits, revealing two dozen bottles hidden here and there by his reverence. And that, also, is inaccurate; for his reverence kicked up such a fuss, bellowing for the protection of the bishop, that an examination into his claims revealed that not only was the car a fake and the housekeeper ditto, but his reverence was phony. He was a Lithuanian plumber who for months had reveled in the racket of bootlegging under guise of holy orders.

When it is remembered that these customs chaps have to protect the border against all violations—narcotics, precious stones and whatnot—it can be seen that they are reasonably busy. Is it any wonder that booze trickles through in tank-loads.

Administrator MacCampbell's dry agents are supposed to mop up what leaks past the customs line. Do they? Tell, oh tell, another joke. To begin with, the rather tragic joke of the out-of-luck citizen of Niagara Falls, who happened personally to be an arid Dry. Motoring home by night he was roared at from an alley. He continued motoring. Whereupon a wild flurry of wheels, a bullet fired, and the law-abiding citizen was shot through the head. He had cause of complaint; but so had the junior United States Senator from Vermont when a dry-agent's bullet laid him low on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington.

If the Third Federal District's dry phalanx of seventy-two stalwarts is drying up northern New York state and the Pennsylvania border, the evidence remains an impenetrable secret. Mr. MacCampbell is a sincere, experienced officer, no doubt of that. He has a mildly virulent hatred of liquor. For years before Mr. Volstead extended the Decalogue, Mr. MacCampbell was a revenue agent operating in dry states like Oklahoma, Kansas and Indiana. There it was his function to exact the annual federal revenue tax of $25 from speakeasies flouting the law of the states. Collecting that, he was unconcerned about local illegality.

An Old Hand at the Game

He emerged from this strangely contradictory service in law enforcement with the reputation of being able to spot a camouflaged barroom by the mere arrangement of street numbers.

Undismayed by the indictment of one of his predecessors in office, a gentleman who showed a talent for realism by organizing and holding office in an alcohol company while prohibition administrator, Mr. MacCampbell conscientiously strives to keep tabs on a territory that might conceivably be made bone-dry if the United States Army were assigned to hunt and destroy every hidden still and camouflaged brewery.

"Our toughest city problem," he declared, "is the miniature brewery. They have them in private houses in Buffalo. How many, I can't say."

He didn't say what else they had; but it was easily discovered. There are a dozen or so breweries in Buffalo, operating full time, and legally. This is the racket:

Expert brewmasters from Germany were imported to pit their wits against the Volstead Act. They discovered that the law could be improved upon. As it stands, a cereal beverage permit licenses a brewer (*Continued on page 44*)

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Up where the Wets begin

Continued from page 44

You can't indict 'em for just displaying money.

"He was a new type to me—not the rough and tumble alien booze-runner. New York State man, he was. He said nothing while we peeked into the car with pocket torches. Remember, we were out of uniform and unarmed, although we showed our badges.

"Webb found a trick compartment under the car, loaded with bottles. I bent down to help him pull the stuff out when the bootlegger tackled me. I struck him with the butt of my torch, and he fell. We let him lay for a few seconds while Webb figured how to truss him. In a flash he had out a gun and banged away. One shot went through Webb's ribs and another smashed my right hand. He hopped in his car and got away—but not far. Webb died.

"All of us fellows think of Webb when we're out on patrol. Most of the runners give up cheerfully when they're caught. They generally duck and leave their loads on the road when we're cornering them. But we take no chances, now. Guns are out when we meet up with 'em."

Collector Whitehill imposes a strict rule of courtesy to the petty smuggler. Rotary, Kiwanis and the rest want no undue hindrance to tourists. Those who entrain at Canadian points, anxiously awaiting the ordeal of the border, are politely asked by veteran inspectors, who wear high collars like sails, whether or not they have anything to declare. If they say "no" and the bottles are uncovered—$5 per bottle. If they clear their consciences and say "yes," the bottles are confiscated and the traveler proceeds—disconsolate but unmulcted.

The customs inspectors are instructed to watch closely all passengers who insist on getting to bed the moment the train pulls out of Montreal, Ottawa or Quebec. Early to bed means booze or some other form of contraband. Three enterprising lads who acquired Pullman pillow cases and filled them with furs and slept on them were betrayed by their premature urge to slumber.

An inspector knew something was wrong, and, as he found no bottles, became even more suspicious. He stood by one of the berths and pretended to lurch. His hand shot under the pillow, felt it. Suddenly he pulled the pillow from beneath the passenger's head. Careful examination disclosed five fox furs neatly tied in tape.

Said an inspector of forty years' experience: "When I get on a train or examine a motor-car, the passenger starts out with the assumption that I'm a damned fool and I begin by taking it for granted that the passenger's a damned liar. We break fifty-fifty."

"Persons, Not Places"

Yet there, in the flourishing town of St. Albans, the thirsty need not thirst in vain. For instance, a lady of the town was turned up by inquisitive neighbors. She made frequent trips into Canada. Officers sympathetically observed her delicate condition and abstained from frisking her. But the delicate condition persisted unnaturally. Finally, they gave her the works, and discovered an elaborately arranged corset with a capacity of nine quart bottles. Before they caught her she was a small but reliable source of supply for the town topers.

In Canada and America prohibition has extended the hospitable possibilities of private homes. Across the border they accommodate you without secrecy when the vending stations are closed and you thirst. This side of the prohibition paradise you can buy a bottle from somebody in the next block—but you have to be known. That's all the difference: there isn't any more.

Ingeniously arranged shipments of scrap iron, lumber and apples that conceal booze used to be common discoveries in the freight yards of the Vermont ports.

"But that has ended," Mr. Whitehill avers. "We are still watchful, and thankful to the Canadian railroads for their coöperation in carefully scrutinizing all shipments across the line."

"If," Mr. Whitehill said, and he was not alone in saying it, "the Canadian government would give a moiety of twenty per cent ad valorem to its customs officers for any liquor found being exported from Canada, our problem would be about over."

As it is, the hardy Vermont farmers have changed their sympathies from the bootleggers to the customs and prohibition forces since they found they could collect twenty-five per cent of seizures for giving information as to caches.

I've heard of barrels of beer being mysteriously dumped in back yards—and by dumped I don't mean spilled as the law requires of contraband liquor. And I'm inclined to credit the large tales told in Vermont of a bootleggers' system by which drinkers are discovered and made the recipients of mysterious deliveries, afterward being billed for these refreshments.

But in rock-bound Vermont, dry for forty years, the mountain-still does not flourish, because there is no need of it. Those fifty-seven roads leading from Canada, plus the lakes, with only thirty-seven patrolmen on guard, assure Vermont of its supply. Prohibition agents are not taken seriously. The only fear rum-runners have is for Mr. Whitehill's nattily uniformed young men.

"Why," the collector told me with righteous indignation, "the bootleg system has even invaded Canada. I have evidence that huge shipments of alcohol from New Jersey were sent into Canada to be adulterated with government Scotch and wrapped in stolen official labels and packages for sale to wholesale bootleggers at a price cut well under official commission tariffs."

He showed me evidence that vending stations in the Province of Quebec are, to say the least, sensitive to the American demand for huge quantities. Under Canadian law liquor is only supposed to be sold by the single bottle. Each bottle is supposed to be taken from the case-package and stamped with the number of the store. Yet in a room atop the federal building in St. Albans lie case after case of whisky shipped directly from Scotland to the commission and from the commission's unit stores—and secured in conveniently large quantities by American bootleggers.

Volunteer reformers in Canada, alarmed at the magnitude of bootlegging, formed a fellowship organization to give chase to bootleg loads, halt them on the road and ask the bootleggers to join in prayer for the good of their souls. The moment the first hardy bootleggers were prayerfully approached they waited long enough to make sure their pursuers were not officers, clouted them with motor-cranks and proceeded merrily on their way.

From the confusion of desultory enforcement one truth emerges—that all along the line the running is large and profitable. Checked it may be, but choked it will never be.

Rebellion at Rouse's Point

Why pay $4 a quart in Canada with the risk of confiscation and a $5 fine making $9 and no liquor, when for an average of $8 in Vermont you can get your bottle with a dollar in pocket.

Lives in memory a picture of a British major hauled from a train at Rouse's Point after having made vain endeavors to bribe customs officers to let a box car or two filled with booze slide past the border. He was caught with a kit-bag liberally lined with bottles. And as the customs men detained him for another day he stormed about the station.

"Outrage!" he bellowed, purple of face and mauve of verbiage. "Has a British subject *no* rights?"

An hour or two later, calmed by release and soothing his soul with a highball in a hide-away, a wise old bartender who has been bartending steadily for eighteen years, Volstead to the contrary notwithstanding, answered his question.

"Nobody has any rights," said he. "But what difference does that make when you can get anything you can pay for?"

The Little Marquis

Some people attract adventure. Of these Sir Jasper Slane is one. For him a quite ordinary railway coach may contain a marquis out of Alice in Wonderland. And the marquis may require his aid against a beautiful and designing woman.

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

IN NEXT WEEK'S COLLIER'S

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